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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the difficulties that two prospective teachers experienced in student teaching assignments in two city schools; both judged outstanding by the faculty from where they were about to graduate. It examines the ways in which these experiences eroded the student teachers' convictions that they could teach all children in ways that emphasized student construction of meaning. Examination of their journals and reflective writing showed how the many demands of classroom teaching and the pressures generated by a traditional staff-room culture together created an environment in which two young women who had believed themselves to be fully committed to progressive practices came to see these reform ideas as visionary and impractical. Findings of the analysis suggest that even the most committed novices are vulnerable to staff-room culture and that a professional community outside of the school that raises questions about the practices the novices are trying to implement can help them to connect the ideas they valued as students with the reality of the real-world classroom. (NAV)

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Tricia Niesz

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National
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on Teacher Learning

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON TEACHER LEARNING

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[1]Formerly known as the National Center for Research on Teacher Education (1985-1990), the Center was renamed in 1991.

Abstract

This paper describes the difficulties that two prospective teachers—both judged outstanding by the faculty of the nationally recognized teacher preparation program from which they were about to graduate—experienced in student teaching assignments in two city schools. It examines the ways in which these experiences eroded the student teachers' convictions that they could teach all children in ways that emphasized student construction of meaning. The authors, the two prospective teachers and two university-based teacher educators, use the journals and reflective writing generated by the novices to show how the many demands of classroom teaching and the pressures generated by a traditional staff-room culture together created an environment in which two young women who had believed themselves (and been believed by their university teachers) to be fully committed to progressive practices came to see these reform ideas as visionary and impractical. They argue that the cases of these two young women demonstrate two points. First, even the most committed novices are vulnerable to the staff-room culture of the schools in which they student-teach and teach. Second, a professional community *outside of the school* that raises questions about the practices that novices are seeing and participating in and about the lessons they are drawing from school experience can help novices to connect the ideas that they valued as students in university classes to the realities they find in their classrooms. The paper suggests, however, that it takes considerable effort and awareness for a novice to see the need for such a community, to find or create it, and to learn from it.

THE SCARY PART IS THAT IT HAPPENS WITHOUT US KNOWING

Helen Featherstone
Patty Gregorich
Tricia Niesz
Lauren Young

> One day is very vivid in my mind. I had been teaching only two mornings a week for a month or so. Jenny, my field instructor from the University, was observing me teach. I had Jenny as a field instructor during another term, and I can think of no time that she intervened while I was teaching. We talked after I was done teaching but never during. However, fortunately, Jenny stepped in during this particular lesson. Students were working during Writing Workshop when I was about to signal for silence. I was getting nervous about the noise level. Jenny stopped me before I signaled, and she softly said, "Patty, wait. Look at what they're doing." I looked and realized that all but one or two students were completely engaged in some stage of the writing process. Then Jenny asked me to listen. I did. It wasn't noisy. It was wonderful. All the talk that I heard had to do with writing. It wasn't loud. I couldn't believe it. I was already beginning to internalize the messages of "school." According to my previous standards, things were going perfectly. However, according to the strong messages about what school should be, something was wrong because the students were too loud. It didn't matter what the talk was about. It was too loud, and that was the only fact that needed to be considered. I went into this field experience feeling strong in my convictions, yet I was already beginning to think in these terms.
>
> Patty Gregorich, July 1993

In the excerpt above, Patty is reflecting on the changes she saw occurring in her thinking and in her behavior toward children in the months she spent as a student teacher in an urban elementary school. Both she and Tricia, close friends and 1993 graduates of a teacher education program in which Lauren and Helen teach, found that their apprenticeship in urban elementary schools challenged many of the beliefs that they felt surest of as students, beliefs that seemed fundamental to their new identity as teachers. As their teachers—during student-teaching, Tricia and Patty were taking an independent study with Lauren and a seminar with Helen—Lauren and Helen were troubled by what Patty and Tricia wrote in their journals and by the stories they told. They had taught

these two young women before, and they knew them to be exceptionally thoughtful and articulate as well as exceptionally committed to teaching for social justice.

Lauren and Helen knew that the first years of teaching can challenge the convictions of idealistic young teachers who leave the university with nontraditional ideas about schools and classrooms (see Featherstone 1993; Veenman 1984). But the conversations they had with Patty and Tricia, both during student-teaching and in the months that followed, helped them see more clearly how the reality of urban schools can eat away at the ideals and convictions that novices have so recently developed.

This chapter grew out of our shared belief that in these conversations we had all learned some important lessons about the work to which we are all committed—the work of learning to teach for social justice. We have organized the paper in such a way as to preserve some of the separate voices and individual stories. The first section, "Tricia: A Student-Teaching Journal," begins with some excerpts from the journal that Tricia kept during and immediately after student teaching; these excerpts describe some of what she was experiencing at the time and some of what she was thinking and feeling about the experience. Three months later, Tricia revisited her journal and her memories of her student teaching; her reflections conclude this first section of the paper. In the second section, Lauren and Helen reflect on Tricia's experience. Then, in "Patty: Keith and His Silence," Patty describes her involvement with one of her students, telling a story that extends through her entire senior year. That section is followed by Lauren and Helen's response to Patty's story. In the final sections of the chapter, we draw together some of what we think we have learned from Patty and Tricia's experiences and from our conversations and collaboration.

TRICIA: A STUDENT-TEACHING JOURNAL

Day One

Today was nice. The children were amazing—it was like they sensed my apprehension and stress level. They were terrific. It made me feel good and happy. Yet I really didn't teach today. I realize how much I would love to sit and listen to and talk to them. Pressures make me feel like I have to be the "boss" (that word that disturbed me

from the kids). I hate that feeling. Perhaps I could find a way to be a friend and listener and still teach effectively. It sounds kind of crazy to put it that way, but [my cooperating teacher] especially thinks I need to get tougher. I'm sure I'll feel more comfortable with that soon. When I have my own classroom it would be easier to keep my quiet manner with kids than jumping into this situation—I think! . . .

Week Two

Student-teaching is a strange thing. Unfortunately it is a very quick jump into reality. And for me and my friends, it is a jump that hasn't been pleasant. Our wonderful TE classes were inspirational and very interesting, but the reality of school and teaching (in many elementary schools) is much different. There are daily problems, interruptions, politics, restrictions, and situations that make it nearly impossible to teach the way we believe. Actually there is probably a way, but it is very difficult to see.

Being in a school five days a week, all day, it chases away some of the idealism. At least it has for me. Our classes made teaching seem rewarding and fun. But it is hard to keep that attitude in the reality. Needless to say, it has been disheartening.

Week Three

This week a new concern has come up. It is a concern that others (and I guess myself) have been talking about. It is my "style." I have been encouraged to be more interested (interesting?). My teacher really draws them in with the way she dramatizes things. That really isn't me. And therefore the kids don't respond to me. Part of the problem may be that I haven't been real interested in some of the things I have been asked to teach. The kids can sense that. But I don't think that dramatizing everything I teach is as necessary as my CT seems to think, if only because I have seen some wonderful teachers that were quiet, calm, and other adjectives that have been used to describe me. I'm not convinced that I can't be a good teacher with my style. Actually [my field instructor] has encouraged me to find my style. I agree that this is a very important step. There is also the question of the age level of the kids. Perhaps first grade

isn't the best place for my "style." I have decided for other reasons that I might like to teach a higher grade. And perhaps the kids are just not used to me.

I'm concerned about the difficulties I've had. They are hard to pinpoint. I'm just not very happy—I don't like it and I don't feel I am doing a good job. Being a perfectionist it is difficult to go into a situation where you don't have control and you can't make things perfect. Unfortunately, I haven't even made the best of things because I'm not happy with the situation. I do realize I need to work harder at making this a better experience. I was even doubting my desire to teach. But then I think about how things will be different in my own classroom. Then I worry about if, again, I'm being more idealistic than reality allows.

The article about the importance of learning about ourselves [(Featherstone 1993)] is all a part of this. For some reason I realize that I don't work very hard at things that I can't do my way. I realize I should do what I can. I have a goal for next week to figure out (a) how to learn from this experience and (b) how to make things better for the kids and myself.

Week Four

I have figured out a way to keep my motivation (inspiration?) up . . . I reread old articles and textbooks from my classes; one class in particular—Debbie's literacy class. It was helpful for two reasons: (1) It made me excited about teaching again! (2) It reminded me that there are ways of teaching that I could probably be successful at.

The ways of teaching and classrooms that made me become fascinated with the field of education, those from our classes, are in a different world than the one I'm in now.

That day I also reread a field log of last winter term. I was in an incredibly exciting classroom in Oak Ridge. This document helped me even more in thinking about how I wanted to teach.

The lesson learned . . . (Well, I have been learning this for awhile): I can't ever afford to stop learning. I have no desire to. I not only need to keep learning for the sake of my teaching, but also for the sake of being interested in teaching. The new perspective

I have from a completely different angle certainly cheers me up. Teaching is less scary when you realize you can always keep learning.

I was thinking about how last week I wrote about having to be perfect. Well, I thought of some goals to help me not worry so much about it. If I keep these things in mind, it will take some of the pressure off. *I WANT TO:* (1) Have a positive influence on kids' lives; (2) Have a positive influence on kids' learning; (3) Have a positive influence on the field of education.

I realize I haven't been writing specifically about instances in the classroom much lately. Perhaps it is because I haven't had many good days yet. (Yet, they are coming soon!) But in realizing that I haven't been writing about interesting incidents, I have realized I am missing an important aspect. I should be more specific about the instances that go "wrong" and reflect and learn from them, documenting more specifically what or why I am unhappy. I need to be learning more than I am from this experience.

Week Five

Well, I finally see that I have learned something! And it took me a while to learn. For first-graders, at least these first-graders, the learning activities need to be intensely fun, like a game, contest, or challenge, for these kids to learn. I have been fighting that knowledge for a long time. In all of my classes I have always learned that the kids need to be engaged and interest. I haven't been fighting that. I have been fighting the "tricking" aspect. It seems so much like I have to trick them into learning with a gimmick or game. That is not what I imagined teaching to be. It felt like bribery or something—maybe condescending is the word.

To be honest, I have to admit that a lot of the stuff I have planned wasn't interesting to six-year-olds—it wasn't "hands on" enough. It is a scary thought but I wonder this: Even though I have had two years of great TE classes, I may be planning things very similar to what I thought school was before becoming a teacher. Perhaps this lesson about extremely interactive learning for first-graders is one I should've known. Yet it didn't carry over from my own learning to teaching. I don't know why but I am remembering a paper written by Jenny Denyer and Susan Florio-Ruane (1991) about TE

undergrads who excel in courses and seem to really "get it" (I always thought I did) reverting to their growing up experience with education. Things aren't carrying over.

After Reading Herb Kohl's *36 Children*

. . . On page 3, I was struck by another feeling I've been struggling with what Kohl (1967) writes about: "For a while, as I learned to teach, the me in the classroom was an alien and hostile being. But nevertheless it was me, terrified, showing my terror to everyone but myself." Kohl just put into words what I have suspected but didn't know how to say. My fear of losing control turned me into a person I didn't want to be with the kids. Therefore I wasn't really able to teach. It all goes back to the "comfort level" that I've talked about before. The fear of chaos changed my teaching style (in a negative way). It's great to know that Kohl felt that same way and overcame it and became a good teacher. The challenge is to stay aware of the problem and the pull to change this way (into a "suppressive" teacher). This stress caused me to stop listening to children at times and responding to their needs since I was so concerned with keeping order. I hope to never stop listening again.

I was struck by how Kohl was able to realize and accept normal human relationships between teacher and students. I think it is rare to find teachers who are human with students. Perhaps this idea (of acting human with kids and accepting natural responses) is where I am trying to go with my thinking . . . It is such a shame that teachers are conditioned and encouraged to develop an inauthentic role with children.

I was also struck by how teaching . . . seemed like a *FIGHT* against society's idea of what teaching is supposed to be. Kohl "fought" against teachers, administrators, etc. just to get the opportunities to truly teach.

Three Months Later

It has been almost three months since I finished student-teaching, and I have recovered, but I've done so by locking it all away somewhere in my mind and avoiding opening the door at all costs. People ask me about student-teaching all the time: "How was it?" I answer: "I didn't have a very good experience." Then I try to change the

subject. They then ask "Why?" (what could be difficult about teaching little kids?), and again I reply vaguely and try to squirm out of it. Anything not to have to open that door. At the risk of sounding melodramatic (and this probably won't be the last time) student-teaching was an agonizing experience. Recently, Helen attached the word "depressed." It scared me at first and then relieved me, because depressed is exactly what I was during those ten weeks.

Not only does it feel yucky to try to remember student-teaching, I actually probably don't remember a lot of it. I started blocking things out during the experience. I became so detached that I am surprised I remember anything at all. This will probably make more sense If I describe what my teacher education experience was like.

I am incredibly thankful to have graduated from the Learning Community teacher education program.[2] I am thankful for the size and closeness of the cohort, for the quality of the educators, for the well-chosen reading materials, and for the attention and experience in classrooms. Learning Community didn't just introduce me to the field of education. Through the program I became a learner for the first time in my life (or so it felt). Through fifteen years of doing school and being called a "gifted" student, I had never realized I could contribute to and participate in learning. I never realized how much I could learn from my peers. Teacher education was exciting, inspirational, and, above all, empowering. Our teachers trusted us to find our own way into the field of education while providing us with the best possible material and modeling. It was an exciting time. I was constantly amazed by the company I was in—by the brilliance of my mentors and peers. (I would come home from class and talk the ears off my roommates trying to relate what and how I was learning.)

From my experiences in the Learning Community Program, I developed a vision of what my own classroom would be like, once I graduated and started to teach. The classroom in which I was placed for student-teaching was in many ways wonderful. My

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[2]The Learning Community Program is one of five thematic teacher education programs at a large Midwestern university; its aim is to prepare elementary teachers to teach school subjects effectively while focusing on the development of personal and social responsibility among students. Twenty-five to thirty juniors enter the program each year. For the next two years, the students in the cohort take all their teacher education courses together.

cooperating teacher was a teacher of education at a number of universities. She had worked with Learning Community for many years. Teaching awards she had won hung on the wall. Teachers and parents went out of their way to tell me how lucky I was to get to work with her. And the children loved her. And in many ways she was a terrific teacher. Her science, social studies, and art units were incredible. We had a huge room filled with all kinds of things—not a barren, cold classroom.

My best memories of student-teaching were when I could listen to and talk to the kids. Of course, I couldn't do that when I was "teaching." Earlier in my teacher preparation, my field experience actually focused on listening to kids. But my role had completely changed. Being "teacher" in this environment meant I needed control. The pressure to manage was so strong, it became the first priority. I couldn't balance management and pedagogy. Philosophically, I didn't want to be *IN CONTROL*, but I had to find a way to do that to succeed in student-teaching.

I was failing miserably. It felt terrible. I would wake up every morning nauseous, with my heart racing. Probably the worst part, though, was my feeling about teaching. I began to actually believe that *THIS* was what teaching was. I hated it as much as children "hate" school. Soon I decided that I would never teach. Then I felt better.

An obvious question is why didn't I try to create some of what I had imagined when I began full-time student-teaching. I wonder that myself, although I have a list of excuses a mile long. During those agonizing days, I didn't try to change things. The thought of it was completely overwhelming and very scary. I didn't feel confident enough to rock the boat. I didn't have the courage or the energy.

Perhaps it was too discouraging because I knew I couldn't transform this class into the learning environment I wanted. The culture was in place; the norms were set up. The little efforts I did make didn't work and didn't make sense in this classroom. The fear of violating my cooperating teacher's practice (which I now believe was almost completely self-imposed) also held me back. I began to realize I wasn't teaching, and the kids weren't learning. The children sensed my apprehension and terror. My unhappiness and discomfort were obvious to everyone in that room. It probably even made the children uncomfortable.

Soon the survival instincts took over: Given the "fight or flight" choice, I flew! I numbed myself to the situation, all the while thinking one of two things: during the darkest days it was, "I'm not going to teach," during slightly better times it was, "This is nothing like how my classroom will be." This was how I coped. I avoided student-teaching in my mind. I avoided it in my actions and began to be less and less prepared.

Fortunately, I employed some more positive survival techniques. Talking to Patty revitalized me. We'd go out to dinner or the bar and end up talking about teaching the entire time. We needed to! We talked about things we saw, about how we'd teach when we had our own classrooms, and about issues that mattered to us. Those talks were so important because teaching became interesting again.

Melissa taught down the hall from me. One day we realized we were both very unhappy, and we began to visit each other regularly. We talked about how we felt, how we'd never been told teaching would be like this, and what we were going to do now that we had this new knowledge. We were also both there when the other broke down. The moral support we provided was necessary.

Writing in my journal and actually analyzing what was wrong was also helpful. The best I felt was one day when (instead of planning) I sat down and looked through old readings from my teacher education classes. I found the pieces that had most inspired me and reread them. I felt alive again—that's the only word that accurately describes it. After student-teaching ended I visited three classrooms that I knew would interest me. In all of these instances, I was attempting to show myself what teaching could be!

The professional relationships with my field instructor, Helen, Lauren, and others eventually led me back into teaching. Helen's seminar and the books and articles we read provided me with the inspiration I needed. The independent study (an ongoing conversation about teaching and social justice with Lauren and Patty) helped me figure out why I was feeling so bad. Through our discussions, Patty and I realized that we felt as if we'd lost our idealism. Actually I think we were teetering between feeling our ideals were being squashed by the "real world" and feeling like we were losing our own idealism.

Through the independent study I got the input I wanted. Patty and Lauren helped broaden my perception of diversity. I was having trouble with the children who were behavior concerns. We'd been discussing creating classrooms that welcomed diversity of all kinds. Diversity in behavior and energy level was something that had never occurred to me. I needed to learn this, and I needed Patty and Lauren to teach me. I had probably begun to see these children as "bad kids."

Another time we were discussing our expectations for kids. It hit me that I had been lowering mine for some children because I was trying to be nice. I'd never have realized that without our talk. Many times Patty and I felt "saved" by revelations we'd had during these discussions. So often our subconscious dictates our action. The interaction of professional learning and growth with actual experience is how we can improve teaching. When learning about gender bias in Lauren's TE350D, I had no doubt about where I stood on the issue. Yet, in the midst of trying to teach, it was far from my mind. It took discussion with other educators about education for me to realize I was unknowingly paying more attention to the boys in the class. Isolation is the biggest culprit of stagnant teaching. We need people!

After we had been student teaching for four weeks, the twenty-five students in the Learning Community Program met as a group. This meeting was devastating. The things people were saying about students and teaching showed me that I wasn't the only one affected by the "realities" of schools. We sounded just like the frustrated, hopeless teachers we'd consistently lamented. I wondered if everything we'd believed, discovered, learned, and said so eloquently for two years had been a dream! Had we internalized anything? One of the best teachers among us even said, "We just can't do everything we thought." I remember searching Helen's face that day for clues to what she was thinking. I wanted to tell her, "This really isn't us. We're usually incredible! We don't really believe what we've been saying." But that's where I got stuck. What do we believe now?

Can we really teach like we thought? Can we keep our idealism? Can we hold on/hold out in the view of opposing forces like school? Are our ideas unrealistic? I may still be very naive, but it seems like not having hope is what makes schools the way they are.

I've been told that first-year teachers turn quite conservative, and now I can see why. But I never thought we would. It has been said that we are the hope for education. I used to hear that with pride and with confidence that things will soon be better. Now I'm more cynical.

By its nature, student-teaching is a difficult time. The children have adjusted to a teacher (the real one) and a way of doing things (the right way). One can't underestimate the power of an established environment or the lack of power in not having one. A change in control is an invitation to test it. I was encouraged to find "my style." Yet I felt the only way to succeed in someone else's classroom (and get the children to respond) would be to adopt her style. It was a very uncomfortable feeling.

Teaching is much more complex than teacher education. Discussing an isolated topic isn't difficult compared to dealing with the thirty people and hundred of things going on. Issues don't come one at a time any more.

Knowing what we believe in theory doesn't mean we are equipped to carry it out. More likely, we'll fall back on what we "know." Two years of intense learning has to contend with a life of living and doing school. New teachers are pressured to give up ideals either to fit in to a school or because they don't know how to reconcile idealism, theory, and learning with the real world. The scary part is that it happens without us knowing.

LAUREN AND HELEN REFLECT ON TRICIA'S STORY

As a student in elementary and secondary school, Tricia had always succeeded in doing what teachers asked of her—she had, indeed, been labeled "gifted"—but in college classes, she discovered that she and her fellow students could create knowledge as well as absorb it. She watched herself taking new roles as a student. She read about and visited classrooms in which teachers thought about learning in new ways and offered their students experiences that she had never had, or even imagined, as a child in a schoolroom. She entered the setting in which she was to student-teach with a vision of teaching that was very different from anything she had encountered as a child. As she

tried to imagine creating a classroom community like the ones described by Vivian Paley, Kathy Short, Herbert Kohl, and Lucy Caulkins, she felt enormously excited.

Her hopes made her vulnerable: She had set her heart on a goal that would be hard to achieve even with a great deal of support. To make matters worse, elements of her vision clashed with the ways schools often work:

> Being "teacher" in this environment meant I needed control. The pressure to manage was so strong, it became the first priority. I couldn't balance management and pedagogy. Philosophically, I didn't want to be *IN CONTROL*, but I had to find a way to do that to succeed in student-teaching.

Watching Tricia sink into depression, Helen was reminded of her own experience as a student-teacher twenty-five years earlier. Like Tricia, she had been animated by a vision of teaching that was very different both from what she had experienced as a student in a very traditional elementary school and from most prevailing practice. Like Tricia, Helen had felt depressed and inadequate while student-teaching in the classroom of a teacher who was highly competent, eager to be helpful, and well regarded by both parents and the university:

> My lessons bored me and they bored the first-graders, but I don't think that I ever seriously contemplated trying anything radically different. I prayed for a snow day every night and drove to school every morning with butterflies in my stomach. I wondered why I had ever thought that I wanted to teach.
>
> Fortunately, every student in my teacher preparation program moved to a new classroom after seven weeks. My second placement was in the first grade of a tiny alternative school in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Here I saw children choosing their own activities, reading real books alone and with partners, building things, painting and drawing wonderful pictures, writing their own books and glowing with pride in their own accomplishments. Although a number of the children had been labeled behavior problems in traditional public school kindergarten, I never saw Nancy, the teacher, raise her voice; her enthusiasm for her students and their learning seemed to inspire them as much as it inspired me.
>
> I fell back in love with teaching. Of course I knew that I wouldn't be able to create a classroom like Nancy's for a long time—indeed, bedlam broke out on the one occasion when Nancy left me alone with her class for the morning—but that realization did not discourage me. The important

thing was that I had reconnected with a vision of teaching that excited me, and I had learned a little bit about what it looked like in practice. I applied for a position in an inner-city public school and began teaching there the following fall. I struggled a lot that year, but at least I knew what I was struggling for.

I had been "at risk." My first student-teaching experience combined with my memories of elementary school to convince me that school had to be a place where adults managed behavior—or tried to—and children completed worksheets and read aloud in ability-based groups. I was saved not by a more successful experience but by spending forty exciting mornings in a very different setting.

It is hard for a beginner to stay clear about what good teaching looks like and what sorts of inadequate approximations are the right ones to strive for. Because, as countless of beginners have found, the alternatives are rarely between excellent progressive classrooms, where children are productively engaged in a variety of developmentally appropriate activities, and a classroom in which all are silently doing seat-work: Not all children in the "progressive" classroom will appear even to their teacher to be productively engaged. Not all conversations will have a positive, supportive tone. Often, when two children are "working together," one is doing all the work, and the other is watching. Or worse.

Revisiting her first months in her own classroom, Helen recalls:

I knew what I wanted—I had seen it in Nancy's classroom. I knew what the school valued: I could see it across the hall and on the expressions of colleagues. I would have been ready to die to defend my students' right to have an experience like the one that Nancy's students were having, but I wasn't always sure how much they were learning in the afternoons when the cuisenaire rods and the sand unit and building stuff came out. Was building a tower really so much better than practicing penmanship? I wasn't sure of the answers to a lot of questions. And there was no one to ask. No one who knew, or even valued what I was trying to do.

The problem, then, is partly how to live with being not very good at doing something different from what others in the building are trying to do. The surprise is that one powerful enemy is yourself.

Tricia helps us to see how difficult it is to figure out what you really do want when your goals do not match those of your colleagues. She shows us how hard it is to

muster the energy and hope needed to create a community that is quite unlike anything your students have seen in school.

But Tricia also identifies strategies that she used to stay afloat during the darkest days of student-teaching: talking to friends and teachers who shared her vision, writing about what was happening and why it troubled her, reading books and articles that had inspired her in the past, and visiting other classrooms. All of these activities helped her to see her environment and her alternatives more clearly. In one way or another, all nourished hope and awareness.

And awareness, Tricia insists, is much more at risk during these early months of immersion in teaching than either novices or their university mentors realize. When a novice who has spent thirteen years as a student in traditional schools joins a traditional faculty, she is tugged powerfully and insidiously toward familiar images of the schoolroom and old ways of thinking about learning:

> Knowing what we believe in theory doesn't mean we are equipped to carry it out. More likely, we'll fall back on what we "know." Two years of intense learning has to contend with a life of living and doing school. New teachers are pressured to give up ideals either to fit in to a school or because they don't known how to reconcile idealism, theory, and learning with the real world. *The scary part is that it happens without us knowing.*

As Patty's story below demonstrates, the culture of the school can overwhelm even personal experience with an individual child.

PATTY: KEITH AND HIS SILENCE

"What is wrong with Keith?" That was my question when I began teaching in a third-grade classroom in September. Keith did not talk. He sat, expressionless. When I asked Keith a question, other students would jump in with the answers: "Miss Gregorich, Keith is shy. He doesn't like to talk." After a few weeks, I began to feel that Keith was not just shy; he seemed entirely withdrawn. I rarely, if ever, observed Keith making eye contact, and he often had a very far away, dazed look on his face. When I asked my cooperating teacher what was wrong with Keith, she told me that he was a "selective mute."

"Selective mute"? What does that mean? "He chooses not to speak," was the answer to my question. I decided to try to reach him.

I realized that he was not writing, so I talked with many people to get ideas for ways to motivate him. I considered keeping him in for recess if he continued to write nothing for the forty-five minutes of Writing Workshop. However, I quickly realized that it might cause him to feel negative about writing. Instead, I chose the cheerleader approach. I tried everything. I offered suggestions about what he could write: That didn't work. I told him I wanted to see words on his paper: "Keith, you need to write." That didn't work either. Then, one day, I noticed that Keith wrote the date and made pictures out of the letters. I wrote him a note and left it in his writing folder: "Wow! It's neat how you can make pictures out of the letters! I want you to write and get your wonderful ideas down on paper!" This didn't work immediately, but in retrospect, I believe that I was making progress. A friend suggested that I offer him the option of either writing or drawing. I told Keith, "You have a choice, you can either write or draw. It's your choice but you must either write or draw." It worked! He drew. I cheered and praised his picture. It was a monster. Now I wanted words!

I talked to more people. They suggested showing him comic strips. I decided to bring in comics from the newspaper. I also brought *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (Van Allsburg 1984) which had captions for each picture but no story. I told Keith that his picture was a mystery to me; I didn't know what the monster was doing. I explained that the pictures in my book were also a mystery. "You could write a sentence about your picture or make it like a comic where the monster is saying something," I said. I left him alone, and when I returned to his desk ten minutes later, he had written words! The monster was saying, "Yum, yum!" I asked Keith if the monster was eating something. I then guessed what the monster was eating, but my guess was wrong. Keith told me that the monster was eating toys. He only said a few words, but I understood. *Wow!* He had spoken to me about his picture. I was ecstatic! I told the world about the triumph.

For the next few months Keith continued to write. Sometimes entire stores. He was quite sporadic in his writing; I would encourage him to write, but some days he would not. However, on days when I saw Keith writing nothing, I would open his folder

later in the day and find a story or a picture. Was he communicating with me? Did he have to feel safe enough before he would share words with me?

As I look back and try to examine what was happening at the time, I feel sad. I did not continue to give Keith as much attention, and it is difficult for me to wonder what would have happened had I persevered. Keith continued to write, but it was still sporadic. I realized that he would sometimes write but not put it in his writing folder where I would see it. I am afraid that some of the trust I had begun to build was lost, and he ceased to feel as safe with me.

In late November, I needed to choose a student to conduct a math interview with. I decided to interview Keith and Anthony. My cooperating teacher discouraged me from interviewing Keith. She expected him to sit silently. This is also what I expected, but I wanted to give him a chance. I wanted to build a relationship with Keith while also learning about communicating with someone who does not use many words. The interview was incredible. I was able to understand exactly what Keith understood about fractions *as well as* I understood what Anthony knew about fractions. The two students' communication styles are completely opposite. Anthony talks often, whereas Keith rarely speaks. I explained to Keith that he did not have to talk. He could draw, write, point, and show me in order to explain his thinking. He used very few words, but he did talk. He usually answered my questions with a word or two. I was very surprised. I expected him to sit silently and say nothing. He showed me that he had a pretty good grasp of fractions.

I was surprised: After having Keith tell me about his picture of the monster, write stories, and clearly communicate his thoughts to me during the math interview, I still expected Keith not to speak; I continued to label him the "selective mute" although he was, without a doubt, communicating with me. I am scared by the use of labels and hope not to use them again. Describing Keith as a selective mute is like describing me as a girl from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Both of us are much more complex than that.

When I thought of Keith as a selective mute rather than as an individual child with unique characteristics, I created certain expectations for him. I expected him to sit silently, to prefer to work alone, and to avoid answering questions or reading aloud.

So, who is Keith? (I feel frustrated that I am just now forcing myself to put into words who Keith is.) Keith is a child who is quite intelligent. He is a good writer. His stories are interesting and make sense. He is a good speller and seems to enjoy drawing. He is also good at math. He can add and subtract, and he caught on quickly to the idea of multiplication. He understands what a fraction is and how to divide a group into parts. He communicates to other children more than he communicates to adults. Sometimes he joins the games during gym and recess, and sometimes he walks around the gym or playground. He doesn't usually make eye contact and doesn't volunteer answers to questions. However, he does answer some questions that adults ask him and sometimes communicates with other children.

For my three months in his classroom, I had labeled Keith and had low expectations. However, I had tried desperately to reach him. I showed interest in him by interviewing him and encouraging and praising him about his writing. Yet when I began my student-teaching experience in January, I forgot about Keith.

After a month and a half of student-teaching, I realized what a disservice I was doing to Keith. I read Ray Rist's (1970) article on teacher expectations. I had always believed that if a teacher expects a student to fail, the child will likely fail, but if the teacher expects the child to succeed, it is likely that the child will succeed. Yet, somehow, in the confusion of teaching, I had forgotten this. When I read what Rist had witnessed in the kindergarten classroom, I was infuriated. How insane that such a crime could happen to children. Then I realized that I was doing the very same thing.

As I reflected on my treatment of Keith, I realized that I did not call on him to answer questions, ask him to read aloud, or even invite him to write answers on the board. I did not intend to be cruel. I was afraid to put Keith on the spot by asking him to speak in class. I didn't want him to feel uncomfortable. What I am realizing now is that I was the one who was uncomfortable. If I did ask Keith a question, I often immediately asked him if he would like to pass.

I was heartbroken when I realized how neglectful I had been and how I had gone off track in my own thinking. I did, however, plan to set higher expectations for Keith. One day, when the class was reading aloud, I asked Keith to read. I asked him if he would *like to read*, but I didn't ask other students if they wanted to read, I just told them

to read. I would also not have let any other child refuse to read unless he or she seemed to be on the verge of tears. However, I allowed Keith to refuse to read, and he shook his head that he didn't want to. I remember the encounter vividly. I had asked Keith if he wanted to read, and as I asked him, I was shaking my head. The look on my face had clearly said that I did not expect him to read, and I recall each of us looking at the other—in a state of limbo—neither of us sure of what the other wanted. Did he want to read? Did I really want or expect him to read? Keith looked confused, as if he were trying to find the "right" answer, and he then shook his head, indicating that he did not want to read.

I am grateful now that I had realized that I had sent Keith all the wrong messages. The next time our class was reading aloud, I called on Keith to read in the same manner I used with the other students. I kept my eyes on the book and simply called his name. After a few moments of silence, I told Keith the page number and had Peter show him where we were. *He read aloud!* I was almost unable to speak. I was so grateful, so excited, so proud of him. I tried to hide my amazement as I asked, "Keith, please continue; you did such a wonderful job reading the last paragraph."

When I expected him to read aloud, he did! It is at the same time such a sad and beautiful thing. If we set high expectations for students, we can witness extraordinary accomplishments. Yet it is so sad and frightening that if we have low expectations for students they may live up to those expectations and fall far below their potential.

LAUREN AND HELEN REFLECT ON PATTY'S STORY

Like Patty herself, we revisit the story of her work with Keith with mixed feelings. Patty's experience seems to say an immense amount about what is involved in moving from the role of university student/participant-observer in an elementary classroom to that of acting teacher.

As a college senior who was spending two mornings a week in Keith's class, Patty was in a good position to raise questions about Keith and to investigate the results of rejecting the little boy's definition of his own relationship to school. In her first months in the classroom, she was an outsider still in the process of defining her role and

her responsibilities. She had more time available to her—time to give Keith extra attention, to talk to him—and she saw the children and the classroom with fresh eyes.

She used her opportunities well, and Keith responded to her optimistic and caring attention by communicating his ideas in a number of new ways. Had the story ended there, it would have been uncomplicated success, a victory for persistence, energy, and hope. In fact, however, history took a less satisfying turn: Patty remained in Keith's classroom, but as her role changed and her responsibilities expanded, multiple problems *and children* vied for her attention. As her focus shifted from Keith, the little boy relapsed into silence.

When Patty stepped out of the role of teacher and into the role of university student or observer, she found ways to communicate with Keith and to draw him into the life of the classroom. But when she assumed the mantle of the teacher and the complex responsibilities that went with that mantle, everything changed. Certainly she had less time to devote to Keith's needs, but Patty insists that was not all that happened. As she moved into the role of insider and teacher, she reports, she began to think differently about Keith. The label that the school offered (and that she had once questioned) now overwhelmed even her own experience. Her description is both eloquently simple and full of remorse:

> I was surprised: After having Keith tell me about his picture of the monster, write stories, and clearly communicate his thoughts to me during the math interview, I still expected Keith not to speak; I continued to label him the "selective mute" although he was, without a doubt, communicating with me.

Like Tricia, Patty finds that taking on the role of teacher creates unexpected difficulties. Matters that had looked unambiguous in teacher education classes—the importance, for example, of holding high expectations for all students—seem murkier. Some sink unnoticed beneath the bubbling surface of classroom life.

Because Patty and Keith did manage to find their way out of the maze of labels and low expectations, their story seems to us to be more a victory than the defeat that Patty felt it to be as she searched her journal remorsefully for mentions of Keith. It is,

however, surely a cautionary tale: Had Patty not talked about Keith with Lauren and Tricia and had Ray Rist's (1970) article, she would never have connected Keith's silence to her expectations of him. As Tricia observed, "Teaching is much more complex than teacher education . . . Issues don't come one at a time anymore."

Surely, the complexity of Patty's new responsibilities distracted her attention from Keith, but there were other pressures as well: As she became the teacher, she left the world of the university and entered the world of the school full time. And, as that happened, she began to see the life of the classroom more through lenses that the school offered. The label "selective mute" helped school staff explain Keith's puzzling behavior; how natural it was that she should adopt it as *their* world became *hers*.

All through senior year, Patty struggled with the contradictions between what she had learned as a student in teacher education classes and what she was experiencing. Sometimes she saw herself behaving in ways that did not fit the beliefs she had brought to student-teaching and wondered whether her ideals had changed, whether her earlier ideas had been naive. But often she flinched in dismay, feeling that she had absorbed through osmosis ways of thinking *and acting* that ran counter to her deepest beliefs. One such incident occurred in the fall, when Jenny, Patty's field instructor, prevented her from calling for silence during Writing Workshop (see page 1); another occurred near the end of student teaching:

> We were having a "Read-In" during my eighth week of student-teaching. I had invited a variety of individuals to visit our classroom and read one of their favorite books for us. Students are bringing blankets and sleeping bags in order to sprawl out on the floor while listening to stories. As I am talking with April, another student teacher, before school, I look out the window and see several students carrying their blankets and sleeping bags. I think aloud, "Oh my goodness. It's going to be total chaos this afternoon!" April jumps in immediately, asking, "Do you mean that you are expecting them to fail before they even walk in the door?"
>
> Wow! April clearly set me straight. I would never have expected students to fail two months ago in the way I was doing now. What had happened? . . . Had I come to believe these things? Deep down I don't think I had—yet my actions did not fit what I firmly believe about teaching and learning. As soon as April confronted me, I knew that the statement I

had made was wrong and that it was absolutely *NOT* how I wanted to ever think about students . . .

When I began student teaching I felt extremely aware. I was unshakable in my beliefs about social justice issues. My convictions were strong. Students must be respected. I must have high expectations for all students. Learning is noisy and not always neat. What happened? . . . I found my self teaching in ways that I did not believe. When someone reflected back to me what I was doing, I was shocked, ashamed, heart broken.

I had been *so* confident that I would hold on to my ideals in the face of any obstacles and always act as I believed . . . Telling my stories has helped me to piece together transformations I underwent. It's helpful for me to examine what happened and why.

Getting Outside the Situation

What's involved in learning from the experience of teaching? Teachers say that they learn most of what they know in classrooms and with and from children rather than from, for example, their teacher preparation program (see, for example, Lortie 1975; Johnson 1990). While this is partly a commentary on the abysmal quality of much that passes for teacher education, it also reflects the enormous complexity of teaching and of classroom life as well as the immense difficulty of teaching *or learning* about the dance that is teaching in the relatively simplified environment of a university classroom.

Given the fact that all teachers can expect to learn most of what will eventually make them good teachers after they leave the university—Frances Hawkins, a masterful teacher of young children, once told Helen that it takes at least ten years to learn to teach well—novices need to think hard about what they can do to make sure that they learn *what they want to learn* from experience. Patty and Tricia's stories show how easy it is to learn the wrong lessons, the ones that convince you that teaching is not for you, that "attending to the needs of individual children" means not expecting or asking the very shy child to talk, or that being an experienced teacher means noticing the decibel level in the classroom even before you notice what the children are actually doing.

But if their stories show that even the most committed novice is in grave danger of learning all the wrong things from the type of experience they are likely to get in a city school, they also show the power of conversation. The stories that these young teachers tell are of novices who felt powerless and who often seemed to be about to go

under: Their excitement about teaching and their belief in classrooms that accommodated, celebrated, and educated all the different children assigned to them was more than at risk. But because they maintained vital connections with other voices and perspectives—with April (Patty's fellow student teacher), with Jenny (Patty's field instructor), with the articles that ignited Tricia's excitement in the first place—they managed to keep themselves and their visions of good teaching alive.

Most people need communities in order to learn. For Patty and Tricia, being part of a community of adults who valued what they valued and who could help them *see* what they passively observed was an answer to being sucked into the quicksand of public schools. The beginning teacher, particularly the beginning teacher in a rigidly bureaucratic urban school, needs such a community even more than other people do because she is trying to manage a complex world that she has only just begun to make sense of and because her work makes immense demands, emotional and intellectual. Unfortunately, not all communities promote inquiry. Although some teachers support one another in asking and answering hard questions about children, classrooms, and learning, many do not. Too often the ready-made community of the teachers' lounge encourages the novice to blame students and their families for inevitable difficulties or offers formulas for simplifying her understanding of a complex issue.

And so, the teacher who wants to stay intellectually alive needs to find or create and then nurture communities and connections that support her learning. This is no easy task: Having been brought up to be "nice," most of us would hesitate, for example, to ask the kind of hard question that April asked Patty; whatever we thought of her comment, we would be tempted to smile and agree that a classroom full of eight-year-olds in sleeping bags is a frightening prospect. Yet Tricia and Patty showed us over and over again how much they learned about their students, their options, their environments, and themselves from others who held up a mirror that reflected their ideas back to them from another angle and who challenged their way of seeing and acting.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The need for learning opportunities does not evaporate when the prospective teacher completes her degree. From Patty and Tricia's experiences in student teaching, the

four of us learned *or relearned* how vital it is for teachers to connect continually with other people who share their faith that all children can learn and that the learning that matters most is often best nourished in classrooms that look very different from those valued in most city school systems. Our own collaboration has allowed us to imagine more imaginatively the kinds of learning communities that can be created to support good practice, for it has introduced us all to new possibilities for collaborative work. Just as Patty and Tricia had not, before today, written with their teachers, Helen and Lauren had not collaborated in this way with their undergraduate students. Yet this collaboration is simply an extension of what we try to do in the classroom: to listen carefully to those we teach, to try to learn well what their stories tell us, to reflect those stories in ways that offer students new opportunities for seeing and sense-making.

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